The Medic: Life and Death in the Last Days of World War II. Leo Litwak. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2001, 240 pp. $22.95.

Reviewed by Ceclia Morris, Washington, DC

Leo Litwak's timing could scarcely have been worse, for he came of age in the midst of the war that signaled a world gone mad on a scale unparalleled in human history. Drafted in February, 1943, just after completing his first year at the University of Michigan, he was sent to train as a medic in South Carolina. The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, he'd majored in literature and now was thrown with a mishmash of American boys that included Southern crackers who despised niggers, Jews, and smart-asses, though not necessarily in that order.

At a comparable age, my own generation and I, some 10 years later, had only to deal with the standard problems of late adolescence and the challenges of a big state university: a far wider range of people than we'd known before, unprecedented freedoms, new responsibilities, and so on. Litwak had to come to terms with terror, betrayal, deceit, and devastating failure, along with death at its most raw and hideous. In short, at a time when most American adolescents are simply growing up, Litwak came face to face with Evil.

Based on his World War II experience, *The Medic* is an intriguing variation on the autobiographical form. It grows from a memoir published in May, 1995, in the *New York Times Magazine's* issue celebrating the 50th anniversary of VE Day, but here he appropriates the standard techniques of fiction.

He dramatizes scenes rather than simply describing them; creates characters who are composites of the men and women he knew then; invents dialogue, merges impressions, modifies, compresses. And he does all this to convey more vividly what he calls "the transforming intensity of war—the shellings, the entrenching, the wounded and dying, the Sauer crossing, marching fire, the sex, the loot, the Paris leave, Marishka [a young Parisian prostitute], the encounter with the Russians, the war's end." Without glorifying or sentimentalizing war, he suggests the excitement a motley collection of men feel while banding together to defeat a true and common enemy.

The result seems to me wholly successful. Litwak is a master of the plain style: his sentences tend to be short, his descriptions spare, his words chosen with a diamond-cutter's precision. If one looked for antecedents, the leaner Hemingway might come to mind—the subject war

and its aftermath, all excrescences pared away. But Litwak is far more interested than his great predecessor in exploring the intricacies of the moral life, along with the cruelties of racism, anti-Semitism, and fascism, so that all through the book the reader finds cameo scenes that reflect yet another aspect of one or another of those hard facts of life.

Early on, for example, he has an exchange with a southerner named Cooper to whom he'd complained about their captain. Cooper told him "to pay no mind to the JB."

"What's a JB?"

"A Jew Bastard."

Lucca [the sergeant] said, "Roth's no Jew. He leads us to mass."

"He looks like an MOT," Cooper said.

I asked Cooper what an MOT was.

"Member of the Tribe."

"What do you mean he looks like an MOT?"

"You know. The nose and the big mouth."

"The captain's no Jew," Lucca said again.

"He might as well be," said Cooper.

Later I asked Lucca if Cooper knew I was a Jew.

"What does that redneck know besides rednecks? Don't worry about the captain, Leo. I'll keep him in line."

"Cooper remained my friend," Litwak adds. "It didn't matter to him when I told him I was a Jew. I bullied him and cursed him but couldn't alter his map of the world where the Jews he didn't know were located at the outermost boundary among the serpents and the dragons."

Nor does *The Medic* offer material for a new "Papa" cult—a cool style that signals a sophisticated nod to intractable cruelty and injustice. For Litwak doesn't offer himself as a romantic figure but, on the contrary, unsparingly probes his own vulnerabilities. In the prologue, for instance, he describes a 1960s experience at the Esalen Institute in southern California, where he agreed to drop the usual journalistic distance—he was there to do a magazine piece for *The New York Times*—and during an encounter workshop found himself howling over the memory of a young German he'd watched his buddies wantonly kill. For more than 20 years he'd blotted out his memories of slaughter, and now he knew that this had stunted him emotionally.

As the book progresses, we see the young Leo hanging out with a guy he knew was a crook and con man because he too "wanted to be carefree and pitiless, able to cross into forbidden territory." While struggling

with a young man's sexual confusion, he shows far more sympathy than most male writers with women's special vulnerability in times of war.

The longest literary work I know that powerfully limns the horrors of war is also the oldest: Homer's *The Iliad*. The shortest is Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," which ends by warning the reader:

> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs
> Bitten as the cud
> Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
> My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
> To children ardent for some desperate glory,
> The old lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
> *Pro patria mori*.

Leo Litwak's *The Medic* falls between and stands up handsomely to the competition.

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